THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Extravagance of God

July 12, 1998
John M. Buchanan

Days pass when I forget the mystery. Problems insoluble and problems offering their own ignored solutions jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing their colored clothes; cap and bells. And then once more the quiet mystery is present to me, the throng's clamor recedes: the mystery that there is anything, anything at all, let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything, rather than void: and that, O Lord, Creator, Hallowed One, You still, hour by hour sustain it.

Primary Wonder
Denise Levertov

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Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF GOD

Hosea 6:1-6
Luke 10:25-37

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke 10:25

O God, in the quiet of these precious moments together, come to us. Use our thinking and singing and praying together as a means of grace, opening our spirits to the astonishing miracle of your reality, your presence, your providence, your love. Use our words to communicate your word to us. And startle us with your truth in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

All things considered, is there a better question than that?

What must you and I do to live our lives to the fullest extent possible?

What must I do to live a significant, important life?

What must I do so that at the end of the day I can know I did what God wanted me to do?

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

The question is asked in many places, and there is no poverty of answers....

If, after church today, you walked down to Borders and browsed the business section checking book titles, you would see first-hand one of the most significant phenomena in American culture. American business, insofar as it is reflected in what business people are reading these days, is looking and sounding more and more like religion, or at least philosophy. Books on how to maximize profits by firing half the work force and scaring the other half to death, written by tough-talking corporate raiders and CEOs with nicknames like "Chainsaw" are slowly being squeezed out by a whole genre of business literature focused on meaning, depth, love, with titles like:

- *The Power of Purpose: Creating Meaning in Your Life and Work*
- *The Artists' Way at Work, Riding the Dragon*
- *The Search for Meaning in the Workplace*

It's a remarkable development. Everybody wants to find meaning and pleasure, depth, significance and satisfaction – almost personal salvation, in work.

The need is not new. We learned, in Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, in Psychology 101, that each of us has a hierarchy of needs: at the bottom are our physiological needs – hunger and thirst, for instance; then safety needs; then belongingness and love needs; and finally, esteem needs. Maslow said our highest human need is for self-actualization, the full expression of our

personhood. To deal with those needs at the top of the pyramid, human beings have turned, traditionally, to religion, certainly not to work.

My father-in-law retired 25 years ago from the Pennsylvania Railroad repair shops. We celebrated his 90th birthday last weekend and had the delightful occasion to see and talk to some of his old friends, all of whom also worked for the railroad. I don't think it ever occurred to one of them to expect meaning and purpose from their jobs in the railroad repair shop. The high point of their day was the 3:30 whistle that sent them to places where they could work on their needs for love and belonging and self actualization; the corner tavern, or home.

Most of them did not expect meaning and purpose from the workplace. But you do – I do. One of the reasons, of course, is that we spend at least twice as much time at our work as they did. Technology helps – or hinders, depending on your perspective. When you and I get in the car to go away for 48 hours, we're on our cell phones before we get to the expressway. We check our messages hourly, late into the night. We go places where we know there is a fax machine. We e-mail around the clock. There is no such thing as a day off. There is no whistle at 3:30 to signal the time to deal with emotional and spiritual needs. And so we look where we must: to our jobs, and sometimes it works for us and sometimes it doesn't. And we go to Borders and buy titles like: *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* and *Circle of Innovation* in which you can receive this advice, and I'm not making this up! "YOU CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT AN ERASER. Forgetting, not knowing, is the highest art.... Think: ORGANIZED forgetting. STRATEGIC foolishness. HOW? Cherish WASTE... SILLINESS... FAILURE: i.e. Ready! FIRE! Aim!" [See *The New York Times*, June 21, 1998, "Purpose in a Paycheck]

I have a suggestion. All of it, the obsessive, ever-expanding work style, the looking to the workplace to provide self esteem and purpose and meaning, is a welling up in us of our most basic and most precious need. Maslow was right: our highest and most basic need is for self actualization or as an attorney a long time ago asked a young religious teacher, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The question, and it is a great one, prompts the teacher to tell maybe the best story anybody ever told.

I like this lawyer. He is not hostile to Jesus. His question is genuine, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It is <u>the</u> question. It's why we buy those books. We might not put it that way exactly, but it is why you and I got up this morning and got dressed up and came here instead of heading for the golf course or lakefront. There is no better question. There is no other question.

The attorney knows the official answer. That's the problem. He knows the answer but it isn't working for him.

Jesus hears the question: Socratic teacher that he is, answers with another question, "What does the law say?"

The lawyer knows. "Love God with heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself."

Notice now the subtle but brilliant shift in energy and momentum. "Right," says Jesus, "do it and you will live."

In that single phrase Jesus has changed the discourse from eternal life to contemporary life, the life you are living right now. And he has changed the focus of the conversation from knowing the right answer to living the answer: from abstraction to concrete, everyday behavior. Not "understand this," but "do this" and you will live.

I like this lawyer. "OK, OK, I'll love my neighbor. Just help me know who he or she is. I'll do what I have to do. Just give me a list."

He knew, and Jesus knew, that the law, Leviticus 19, defines it. "Neighbor" is kin, relative. Love your brother and sister, parents, cousins, as you love yourself. The rabbis taught that "neighbor" is fellow Jew, your racial/ethnic/faith family. Is there more?

Now comes the best story anybody ever told and remember, we're still talking about the lawyer's original question, "How shall I inherit eternal life?" They're wonderful characters and the action is so complicated that almost nobody gets it even though we've heard it a thousand times.

A man going from Jerusalem to Jericho falls among robbers, is stripped, beaten, left half dead. He's the only anonymous character. He may be Jewish. He may be African. He may be Persian. He has no clothes on, so we can't tell. He's half dead so we can't hear his accent and place him. He is, in his utter vulnerability, a human being.

A priest passes by. For obvious professional reasons – he's a clergyman – I sympathize with him. He passes by on the other side of the road. So do I. Every day of my life. So do you. You can't stop on Michigan Avenue and give money to everyone who asks and buy packages of M&Ms to support everybody's basketball team, or buy *Streetwise* from every vendor. Besides, it could be the oldest scam in the world. Lean over to see what's going on and you'll get hit from behind by the man's compatriots. It happens all the time. Or, stop and do the wrong thing and get sued. Don't get involved in this. Besides, again, there are reasons. If the man is dead, and it looks like he may be, and the priest gets within six feet of him, the law, Leviticus 21, says the priest is unclean and unfit for priestly duties. He has to turn around and return to Jerusalem and stand in front of the altar and buy a heifer and sacrifice it. So it is no small risk he takes if he stops. His wife and family are expecting him for dinner. I sympathize with the priest. He's got responsibilities. Maybe he's on the way to Jericho for a meeting of the Presbytery Committee on Highway Safety.

A Levite follows, an administrative assistant in the temple. He's going somewhere too. These are not bad men. They are reasonable, cautious, practical men.

Along comes a Samaritan. Everybody hates Samaritans. The reasons are historical and complicated. This is how one commentator explains it:

> "Samaritans were descendants of a mixed population occupying the land following the conquest by Assyria in 722 BCE. They opposed rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem and constructed their own place of worship on Mt. Gerizim. Ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, and religiously a heretic, the Samaritan is the very opposite of the lawyer as well as the priest and the Levite." [Fred Craddock, *Interpretations*, Luke, p. 150]

Religious identity, all too frequently, relies on identifying the outsider as an outcast, unclean. Religion, all too frequently, relies on identifying someone to hate.

It's like Serbs and Muslims – Bosnian, Albanian, Croatian – it doesn't matter. It started with a battle 750 years ago and it has, over the centuries, become completely detached from any reality and now has a life of its own, deeply, hatefully, violently racist. In Northern Ireland it began with a battle 308 years ago and today Protestant fanatics will look you in the eye and tell you, in all seriousness, that Catholics aren't very smart, have squinty eyes, and smell funny. It has nothing to do with anything, but people will kill one another without much thinking twice, and that's how Jews thought about Samaritans.

Jesus could have floated this tale had he made the Samaritan the victim and a noble Jew the care-giver. My first pastoral crisis came at Halloween, 1960, when I suggested that my little church participate in "Trick or Treat for UNICEF" and a church officer and member of the John Birch Society announced that he wasn't going to vote to feed "little Commie Cuban kids." Anyhow, Jesus could have floated this story better if the hero was a Jew and the victim a Samaritan. He might have been called a bleeding-heart liberal, but he would have made a point about compassion and caring, which is what we mostly think the story teaches. We name hospitals and civic awards and even laws for the Good Samaritan.

And that is a good part of what this remarkable story teaches. If you want to be fully alive, take care of your neighbor who needs you. If you want to be fully alive, find someone to love: locate someone, some cause to give yourself to, something you care about so deeply you will open your heart and soul and checkbook. If you want to live, he said elsewhere, give your life away.

As ethical exhortation it is a brilliant story. But Jesus wants more. He is after the lawyer's heart and soul. He's focused on that haunting question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Let's go back and look again. If that's the question, who's really alive in this story? Well, the Samaritan, obviously. He's gloriously alive. He's strong and generous. He's got broad shoulders and a big heart. He's free, free enough to stoop down and pick up a half-dead, anonymous human being, and then for no earthly reason, except the size of his heart, binds up wounds and pays the cost and takes infinite loving care to see that the man is cared for and brought back to life. One of my favorite pictures is Vincent Van Gogh's "The Good Samaritan." Van Gogh portrays him rough, almost burly. He's a big man; he lifts the beaten victim almost like a little child and places him lovingly on his donkey.

And the victim is alive, or at least on the way to life, saved by this incredibly extravagant Samaritan, by this utterly amazing, undeserved compassion.

And who's not alive? Who's half-dead? Who are the victims at the end? The priest and the Levite: victims of a deadly theological and moral orthodoxy about which they are absolutely certain and to buttress and prove, they can and do endlessly quote Holy Scripture: victims that is to say, of a confident, self-righteous religiosity that not only had no room for extravagant, inclusive love, but was threatened by and scared to death of it.

I get a lot of mail about the issue that is dividing our church. Most of the letters say the same thing. "Reverend Buchanan, you keep talking about Jesus' inclusive love. His love was inclusive, <u>but</u>..." and then they tell me that his love really wasn't inclusive and that the radical inclusivity of Jesus Christ is actually frightening.

The priest and Levite are the victims in the story and so is the lawyer, the good man who started all this business. He really wants to know what he must do. He's willing to do it. He wants more and better rules. He wants a clear moral guideline. He wants to please God and feel good about himself by doing whatever it is that God wants or whatever God wants him to avoid doing.

And what Jesus wants is for him to be quiet, and to stop trying so hard, and to take a deep breath and to hear the good news:

- the news that God is a God of love
- the news that God's love does not depend on his race, ethnicity, gender, theological orthodoxy, or even his moral purity
- the incredible news that God's love is unlimited, unconditional, unqualified: that it respects and stops at no boundary, or border, or class or status.

Jesus wants that lawyer to stop trying to be perfect and to hear about a love that is perfect, a love so extravagant, so undeserved, that it literally, as the prophet Hosea promised centuries before, binds us up and heals us and comes to us like the gentle rain of springtime.

We see a picture of it every time we baptize our babies and with the water of baptism claim God's promise, to love and welcome, to nurture and sustain. "You are a child of God: you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

The great theologian, Karl Barth, said that the Good Samaritan was standing right there, in front of the lawyer. Jesus the Christ was his name.

And so, for you and me, some of us knowing exactly what it is to be a victim, lying by the roadside, in all our vulnerability, perhaps sick in soul, rejected, discarded, needed by no one, perhaps vulnerable in our grief, or our fear, or our desperate loneliness, or perhaps sick in spirit, working so hard, with no boundaries left between work and the rest of life, wondering if it will ever start to make any sense, asking in quiet desperation, "What must I do to live?"

Jesus wants the lawyer and you and me to stop and listen and hear and experience and know a new truth, the truth of God's extravagant love, a God who, like that Samaritan, comes to us and, without condition, picks us up and binds our wounds and brings us home...to live, fully, joyfully, eternally.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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O, God, we would love you by loving our neighbors. But may we never forget your love that came to us in Jesus Christ and comes to us wherever we are, whoever we are, every day of our lives. Amen.